

# ***Compassionate Service***

Matthew 20:20-34

## **INTRODUCTION**

**Compassionate Service—We will humbly serve the least, the lonely, and the lost.**

## **Our Compassionate Savior (Matthew 20:20-34)**

What is “compassion”?

- Greek word refers to the bowels, Hebrew refers to the womb
- Latin roots to our English word means literally “to suffer with”

## **The Ministry and Impact of the Early Church**

“Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:25-37).

In Roman society, the demographics were broken down as follows:

- Elite—3%
- Moderately Wealthy—15%
- Subsistence Level (stable)—27%
- Subsistence Level (not-stable)—30%
- Consistently without food—25%

Rupen Das wrote a significant article entitled, *A Compassionate Community: What Did the Early Church teach that made Christians “Lovers of the Poor”?* In it, he writes:

“In the 4th and 5th centuries as poverty increased in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, the cities were unable to absorb the poor, who were mainly migrants and not citizens. Princeton historian Peter Brown writes, “The existing structures of the city and the civic model that had been associated with them collapsed under the sheer weight of a desolate human surplus, as the cities filled with persons who were palpably “poor”. They could not be treated as citizens, neither could they be ignored...” It was only the Christians who responded to the needs of the poor who were primarily non-Roman citizens.”

In Greek and Roman society, it was not uncommon for the wealthy to contribute to the overall well-being of society but they most often gave to the city itself or the temple, not the poor directly. But it was the Christian bishops and disciples that created a social awareness of the poor themselves. So, while classical benefactors saw cities and citizens, the Christians saw the poor. Even...

The Roman Emperor, Julian the Apostate, while on his way to the Persian frontier in 362 A.D. was appalled by the giving habits of his fellow pagans when compared with the charitable deeds he had seen among the Jews and Christians. Writing to Arsacius, the pagan high priest of Galatia,

Julian states, "For it is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galileans [Christians] support not only their own but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us [that is from the pagan priesthood]."

Quoted in Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Latter Roman Empire*

Earlier in the 2nd century, Aristides, the Athenian philosopher who became a Christian writer, described the social consciousness of the Christians. In his Apology, which he addressed to Emperor Hadrian, Aristides writes about the moral quality of the lives of the Christians. (Apology 15)

They have the commands of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself graven upon their hearts...they despise not the widow, nor oppress the orphan; and he that has, gives ungrudgingly for the maintenance of him who has not. If they see a stranger, they take him under their roof, and rejoice over him as a brother; for they call themselves brethren not after the flesh but after the spirit. And they are ready to sacrifice their lives for the sake of Christ; for they observe His commands without swerving, and live holy and just lives, as the Lord God enjoined upon.

Aristides, "The Apology of Aristides"

Eusebius, recorded in "The Church History" during the plague,

All day long some of them [the Christians] tended to the dying and to their burial, countless numbers with no one to care for them. Others gathered together from all parts of the city a multitude of those withered from famine and distributed bread to them all.

Eusebius goes on to state that because of their compassion in the midst of the plague, the Christians'

"...deeds were on everyone's lips, and they glorified the God of the Christians. Such actions convinced them that they alone were pious and truly reverent to God."

Rodney Stark, in his book on *The Rise of Christianity*, wrote this:

"Christianity served as a revitalization movement that arose in response to the misery, chaos, fear and brutality of life in the urban Greco-Roman world.... [That it] revitalized life in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent urban problems. To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fires and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services."

Rupen Das in his article again said this:

"The earliest communities that followed Christ did not have to be told to be compassionate to the poor and marginalized. They merely did what they had seen Christ do and taught."

—Rupen Das in his article, *A Compassionate Community: What Did the Early Church teach that made Christians "Lovers of the Poor"?*

He goes on to remind us that we see in the book of Acts that the early church:

- Healed the sick and crippled (Acts 3:1-10; 5:12-16)
- Ensured no one in the church had need (Acts 4:32-36)
- They made sure that the widows especially were taken care of (Acts 6:1-7)
- They taught that “pure and faultless” religion was to take care of the most vulnerable (James 1:27)
- They taught that we were saved not BY good works but FOR good works (Ephesians 2:8-10)
- Ministering to the poor was just as important as having proper theology and missiology (Galatians 2:1-10)
- Their good works was a demonstration that the Kingdom of God had come! (Matthew 5:3-12)

Henri Nouwen and others wrote a small book on the centrality of compassion as a virtue for the believer. He said this:

“Our ‘second nature’, the nature we receive in and through Christ, sets us free to live compassionately in servanthood. Compassion is no longer a virtue that we must exercise in special circumstances or an attitude that we must call upon when other ways of responding have been exhausted, but it is the natural way of being in the world. This ‘second nature’ allows us to see compassion not in moralistic terms, that is, in terms of how we have to behave as Christians, but as *a new way of being in the world*. As Christians we are called to be ambassadors of Christ in whom the reality of God’s infinite compassion becomes concrete and tangible...”

--Henri Nouwen, Donald P McNeill, and Douglas Morrison, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*

#### ***Whom may we serve with compassion today?***

- Homeless
- Single moms/Pregnant women
- Recovery community
- Immigrants
- Refugees
- International Students
- Christians in 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries

***But what about those who don’t deserve or appreciate our compassionate service?*** (Luke 6:27-36)

Compassion fatigue is REAL. Because of this, we MUST BE FILLED with the Spirit. But we must also be willing to enter in to the suffering of this world because Jesus was willing to suffer with us.

#### **Questions for Personal Reflection/Group Discussion**

1. How does the understanding that compassion means being willing “to suffer with” encourage you when you think about our relationship to God through Christ?
2. Why do you think we struggle so much with expressing genuine compassion?
3. How does the example of the early church impact you?
4. When you think of specific people groups to whom we may show compassion, who might you express the compassion of Christ toward and how?